

# Ooh, Look, a Waterspout!

by Lt. Scott Erwin

I couldn't believe my luck as I climbed into the crystal-clear skies over South Texas. There I was, a bright-eyed T-45 student hitting the road for five days to finish up the instrument-rating portion of the jet syllabus with a good-deal cross-country to Washington, D.C. My IP for the next few days would be a very senior instructor with a "Santa Claus" reputation. I had walked to the jet without a doubt in my mind that this was going to be a weekend to remember. I would get away from the grind and heat of Kingsville, experience fantastic training in some of the busiest airspace in the United States, and (I hoped) boost my grade-point average a few notches before the dynamic parts of the curriculum began.

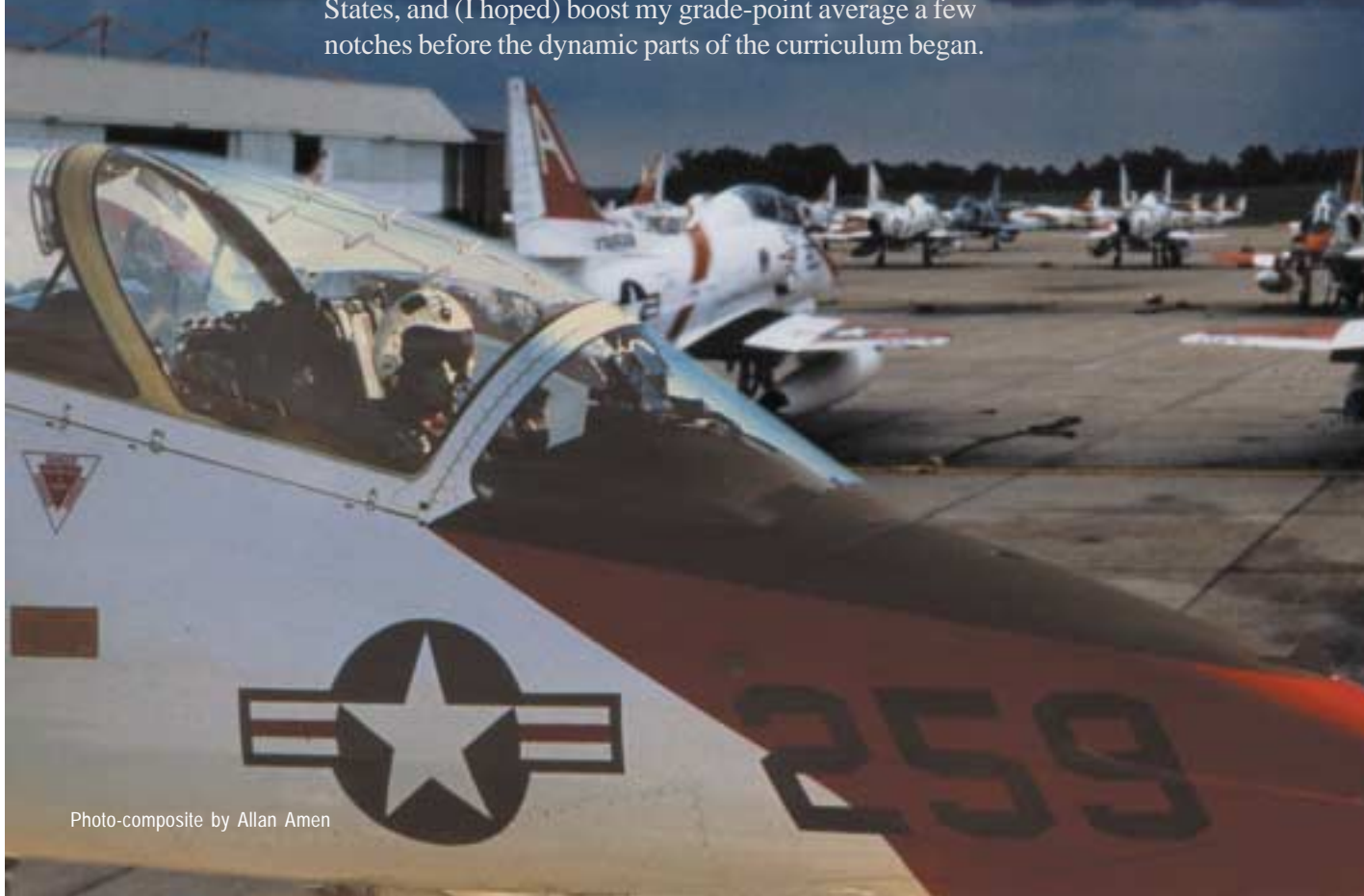
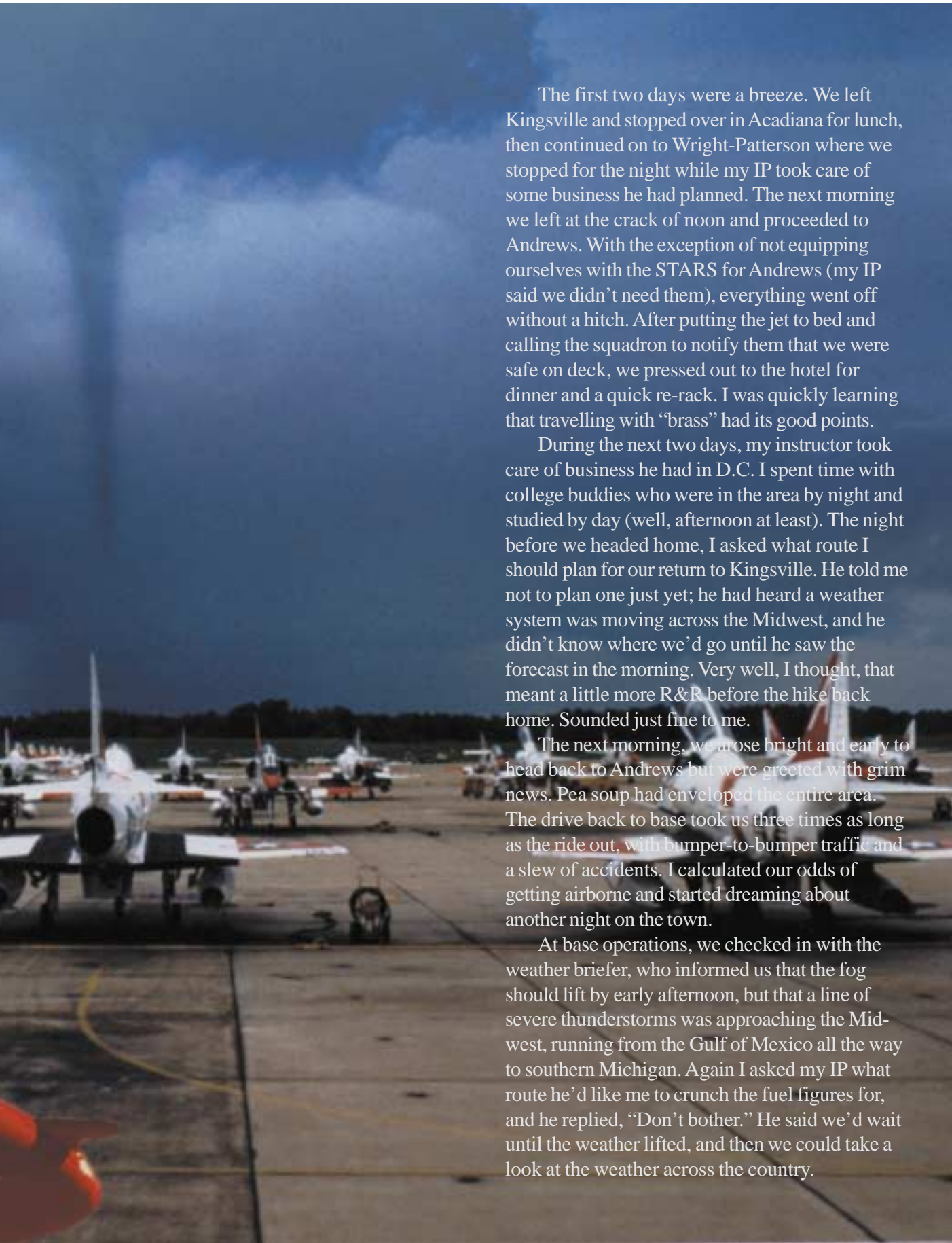


Photo-composite by Allan Amen



The first two days were a breeze. We left Kingsville and stopped over in Acadiana for lunch, then continued on to Wright-Patterson where we stopped for the night while my IP took care of some business he had planned. The next morning we left at the crack of noon and proceeded to Andrews. With the exception of not equipping ourselves with the STARS for Andrews (my IP said we didn't need them), everything went off without a hitch. After putting the jet to bed and calling the squadron to notify them that we were safe on deck, we pressed out to the hotel for dinner and a quick re-rack. I was quickly learning that travelling with "brass" had its good points.

During the next two days, my instructor took care of business he had in D.C. I spent time with college buddies who were in the area by night and studied by day (well, afternoon at least). The night before we headed home, I asked what route I should plan for our return to Kingsville. He told me not to plan one just yet; he had heard a weather system was moving across the Midwest, and he didn't know where we'd go until he saw the forecast in the morning. Very well, I thought, that meant a little more R&R before the hike back home. Sounded just fine to me.

The next morning, we arose bright and early to head back to Andrews but were greeted with grim news. Pea soup had enveloped the entire area. The drive back to base took us three times as long as the ride out, with bumper-to-bumper traffic and a slew of accidents. I calculated our odds of getting airborne and started dreaming about another night on the town.

At base operations, we checked in with the weather briefer, who informed us that the fog should lift by early afternoon, but that a line of severe thunderstorms was approaching the Midwest, running from the Gulf of Mexico all the way to southern Michigan. Again I asked my IP what route he'd like me to crunch the fuel figures for, and he replied, "Don't bother." He said we'd wait until the weather lifted, and then we could take a look at the weather across the country.

By noon the fog lifted, and my IP formulated our plan: We would fly from D.C. to Atlanta on the first leg and assess the weather while we refueled for the rest of the return trip. “Roger that,” I said, “I’ll go do the planning, and we’ll be off.”

He then informed me that our fog delay had put us too far behind schedule and not to bother with that “silly” fuel planning. “When you’ve been around a while, you’ll get a feel for how far you can make it on a tank of gas,” my mentor intoned. I wasn’t quite convinced, but he was in no mood to argue, so we filed our flight plan and walked to the jet.

Once airborne, I began trying to calculate the fuel numbers for getting to Atlanta, and the numbers weren’t looking promising. The fact that we were flying into a 100-knot headwind the entire way certainly wasn’t helping matters. Fifty miles east of Atlanta, the low-fuel light came on, and the seat cushion continued to inch its way into an uncomfortable place. ATIS was calling weather in Atlanta as 300 overcast, with rain and thunderstorms in the vicinity. Furthermore, winds on deck were from the east, so we would have to fly past the field, wasting more precious fuel to set up for the approach. Things were getting hairy, and I expected to hear my IP tell me he would be taking the controls to make sure we got this thing right. Instead I heard, “Have you ever shot an ILS before?”

“Uh, no,” I replied, which was the best I could come up with, knowing what was coming next.

Sure enough: “Well, there’s always a first time.” I’d shot ILS approaches in the simulator, but that benign environment was nothing like the conditions we were in. Turbulence violently shook the airplane, and flashes of light through the rain-spattered canopy stole my attention from the needles. I did my best to concentrate, knowing there wasn’t enough fuel for a second try. I kept wondering how this good deal had gone so bad. We broke out at 250 feet, slightly left of centerline. I dipped the wing and made it on deck. I tried to stop my hands from shaking as we taxied clear of the runway to the transient ramp.

As I shut down the engine, my instructor told me that I could monitor the refueling while he walked in to check the weather. I stood under the wing of my Goshawk and got drenched while I watched the fuel get pumped into the jet for what

seemed like an eternity. When the fuel guy finished, he handed me the receipt, and I slogged my way into base ops to catch up with my instructor.

We decided that the best bet was to proceed from Atlanta to Pensacola, where we could one-leg it to Kingsville, provided we could get around the weather. In no time, we were suited up and headed for Pensacola, again with no planning other than the DD-175. Shortly after takeoff, my IP ceased responding to my questions on the ICS. As I looked in the mirror on the canopy bow, I could see him trying to get my attention by waving his hands. By process of deduction, I quickly figured out that the microphone in his mask had gone bad. I heard constant clicking and hissing noises in the ICS whenever he tried to talk.

The rest of the trip to Pensacola was conducted with me trying hard not to get a flight violation by telling him what I intended to do, with him giving me a thumbs up or down as he saw appropriate. My already frazzled nerves were not helped in the least by this methodology, and I wondered what could go wrong next.

We landed in Pensacola, and again I stayed with the jet during refueling while my IP went in to check the weather and plan a route for the next (and, I hoped, last) leg of our journey. When I wandered inside, the news got worse. The weather briefer told us that the thunderstorms were mere miles away from Pensacola and moving our way quickly. The entire area around the base was in a weather watch, and I began to think that reason would dictate that we call it a day and try again the next morning.

Apparently, my instructor saw it differently. Training-command aircraft aren’t supposed to fly during a weather watch, but his plan was to take off as soon as possible. It was early evening and beginning to get dark. He planned to head south over the Gulf of Mexico to avoid the thunderstorms that topped out at over 50,000 feet. From there, we would cut west and proceed direct to Kingsville over water.

Let’s recap: night, he had no way to talk to me, and there was a thunderstorm. Did I mention that it was January, and Pensacola was an unseasonably cold 30 degrees or so? With the way our luck had gone all day, it was with a sense of dread that I strapped on my gear and walked to the jet. The wind was whipping the trees to and fro in the

growing darkness. I pondered bribing a linesman to tell us we were on fire during startup to avoid what I was sure was an impending disaster.

We climbed into the jet and strapped in with no particular rush on my part. As I plugged in my hoses and cables, I flipped on the battery switch and keyed the microphone to get an ICS check (forgetting that I would get no response), but the words never made it out. As I looked up from the left console, my eyes swept over the bay just in time to see a large, black tornado moving steadily toward us. It was actually a waterspout, but I had never seen one before and wasn't too concerned about this distinction. Instead of the standard "ICS check," what came out of my mouth was a few expletives and "That's a tornado!" I quickly selected the appropriate procedures. First, battery switch off. Second, egress. Third, run. My instructor agreed with my impromptu EP—he was in hot pursuit across the tarmac.

We called it a day at that point. The next morning, with his mask fixed, we had an uneventful return to Kingsville. Two days later, an IP approached me with a fuel chit and asked me if I had signed it. My first thought was that we must have

been overcharged, and I hadn't caught it. When I told him that I had signed it, he asked if I had looked it over closely, and my fears about owing the government gas money got worse. Upon closer inspection, I saw that the gas we'd gotten in Atlanta was only about 70 pounds shy of a full tank. We'd had only about 10 gallons of gas (not to even mention what is unusable) on shutdown. I shudder to even think what would have happened had we not broken out when we did or if I had gooned up the approach, because there certainly would not have been a second chance.

In retrospect, I would have done a few things differently. I should have insisted that we do fuel-planning prior to leaving Andrews. I should have looked at the fuel chit more closely and pointed out to my IP how bad a situation we had been in. I should have insisted that we abide by regulations and not attempt to fly in a weather watch, with or without myriad other distractions.

It all worked out and I even got a few "aboves" out of the deal. In the end, however, I learned more about the unwritten rules of aviation in those flights than in any others before it. 🦅

Lt. Erwin flies with VFA-15

# On Cat 1

## Coming Attractions for October

- Flame-Out Over Sagami-Wan
- The Fine Line Between Can-Do and Stupid
- Hacking It
- Terror in the Mountains